GLC 63
CAMERON

WRITINGS

HENRY, January 1984 [5 pages]
[Cameron's grandfather Henry McLain]

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HENRY
Barbara M. Cameron
January 1984

November 1. It was a grey and very chilly day. Lifeless. Muted grey skies, muted dried and brown prairie. Still, without wind but the chilliness always makes it feel like there is a wind. Years ago when I was a kid, these cold November days were some of my favorites. I would run outside, galloping around like my horse Cricket or play hide and seek near my grandfather's wood pile. But this isn't one of those days.

I'm dressing in my mother's room, black on black. Now I know where my clutter comes from. Curlers, magazines, money and socks on her dresser. My little brother Russell comes in and out. Not at all embarrassed to see an adult woman getting dressed. We look at each other in the mirror but we pretend not to. He comes in always with that side glance toward me just like three years ago when I last saw him. Monica says he really loves school and throws a fit if he has to miss it. We remembered how we found ways to miss the bus, get sick.

My mother told me last night that I could sleep in her bedroom but I couldn't bring myself to. It's hard enough to be here without hearing Swede's whistling or feeling his quiet but unobtrusive power moving through the house. There's no hat hanging for him nor is there a pair of his boots sitting casually in the living room.

My mom and my sister Monica were up late making sandwiches for the lunch. It doesn't seem possible that only yesterday I was in San Francisco having an afternoon feast on top of the hot tub while strategizing with Mary Dunlap and friends about the immigration law suit.

Yet here I am in South Dakota. Last night we, the immediate family, sat in the room off to the side. The room with my grandfather in it. The casket closed. My frail grandmother was there. My uncle Billy. My aunt Angeline. My mom. My sister. My grandfather.

There was a grey cowboy hat so carefully placed on top. Flowers about the room. Hymns playing in the background. Why it was only 12 years ago that I was last in this funeral home but my grandfather was alive then. My grandfather was alive then. He was alive just a month ago.

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The weekend before he died, I started to get very depressed. I felt that something was missing inside of me, something was being taken out of me, out of my soul. Something. By Monday night I told Linda that I felt something terrible was going to happen. I was in tears. This something. I don't trust my intuition.

I want the day to go fast and yet I don't want it to end. I feel smothered by the grey, the endless hills. These things that I sometimes long for in the city. No clamor, no noise, just the hills, the ravines. I want to beat this earth, this goddamn earth which will later slowly swallow him into it. Who digs those holes.

I always believed that my grandparents would never die. Sitting in the back seat of the car, I always thought this. I could never imagine the funeral. One time I told them they would see the world change, that it would end in their lifetime and that I would help make it happen but that they didn't have to worry because it would be wonderful. The world has changed alright. It's like one of those perils of Pauline movies with the buzzsaw coming down just inches from ending the life underneath.

My mom said it would have been better if they both died at the same time. I understand what she means. She is not being callous. After all they were partners for almost 56 years.

I wondered at the funeral home, who would bury Mr. Kessling? He's buried so many of us. There were two white women at the rosary. Everyone there shook my hand, hugged me, told my mom that I am pretty. Regine, Marie, Vivian, Agatha, Tweedles and others. All there. A lot of them are gone too. I't comforting to see their faces again. I like to remember them the best years ago sitting outside the community center in the shade laughing with that endless teasing and joking.

Some of the rosary was in Lakota and then later they sang Amazing Grace. Somehow it felt out of place. There was no wake. I can see the years have changed us, maybe into dried corn. There are few old Indians left. So few. This is dangerous for me. It is dangerous.

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Everything seems to take a long time but it always seemed that way when I lived here. My brother Lawrence is going to drive us to the funeral. His manner is somewhat like my Uncle Billy. It could almost be like a long time ago. I'm fantazing, I'm dreaming. No, it's not Billy driving, No, it's not my grandfather sitting in the front. Come back to reality and don't break down. Don't even cry. Okay?

We're pretty quiet all the way to Mobridge where we pick up Lawrence's suit and get a quick breakfast. I wonder if we'll make it on time. My mother was always running late. But we can't be late.

I'm certain Father Augustine will be the priest even though my sister told me it is a different priest. Father Augustine has been gone as long as I have. The town seems so deserted and lonely. Wakpala. We drive past the trailer where I first came out and almost died because of it. I'm reliving everything of my life that I experienced here.

More people greet me and my family at the church. Some of them have not seen me since I was in braids. I see the hearse and get frantic. Where is the casket. Already inside. I did see my grandfather. My mom asked me if I wanted to see him. I didn't really want to. I've never seen the results of third degree burns but I had to see him again.

We go into the church. I go through the motions of Catholic routine. Bless yourself upon entering. Genuflect before sitting at the pew. I do this not really sure if Catholics still do that and not noticing if others are. The bell is struck. All rise - in this cold church. The altar has a chalice with "Sioux" designs. I liked the gold one better. The mass for the dead begins.

I'm between my grandmother and my mother. My aunt is crying quietly all the time even last night. My grandmother finally realizes that I'm there beside her but I can't touch her. Finally I'm starting to cry. The priest speaks. We respond. All the words are in english. I remember the family joke about Grandma Hattie who went to confession in this church at easter time and it had been so long since she'd been that the mass was delayed, the confession line was still waiting and long, and finally she came out but was crawling. I remember the bingoes in the basement and how I was always being reprimanded by the sisters for saying yeah sister instead of yes sister

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And that the first writing piece I had done was about a midnight mass and my standing outside by myself in the quiet falling snow.

There's a part in the mass, as always funeral or not, where the priest sermonizes. This part I've always hated. They talk about sinners and how bad we all are. I grit my teeth. And sure enough it is bad. It is worse than bad. He dares to call my grandfather by his first name. He says, "When the sisters and I were driving down here this morning, we were talking about Henry and what kind of man he was and I said to the sisters, you know whenever I think of Henry, I always think of his faith." I think bullshit, fuck you. Then he says and the sisters agreed, that Henry had deep faith. I think that he probably had deep faith that you would take and take. And I think just what the hell do you know what my grandfather thought or how he lived or how he loved or how on Saturday nights he drank a six pack of budweiser and talked about the old days when the first priest came and gave food to the Indians and how they all threw it down the hill after the priest left. He goes on about Henry. Henry. Henry. Henry this and Henry that. You take his name in vain.

The mass will be over very soon. It really will be final very soon. The cemetary is most certainly final. Up the hill to the cemetary. Park, get out. More words from the priest. There's my cousin Crackers. So much older looking. The air is still. The lowering has started. The creaking of the frame that holds the casket. Then someone begins singing a Lakota song for my grandpa whose name is Ogala Tanka, not Henry. The man who is singing says he is singing for Ogala Tanka. Then a wind starts, first it is a slow breeze and rises as the song does and ends as the song does. My grandfather is down there. Put the cover on. Thud, the first shovelful of dirt. Thud, thud, thud. Cry, cry, cry. My mom takes me to the burned house. Osinka.

Then the drive back. We take a slow turn. We go the long way toward the Rattlesnake Buttes, toward the Lonesome Buttes. My grandfather said once he saw a coyote on it's way to the Lonesome Buttes and the coyote was singing Lakota songs and talking about something. And in between the buttes is where my grandparents lived before they moved into town. Where my mother grew up, where I grew up. The road to the place is grown over. My mom is starting to cry. We go on the long way road. We're crying. This has been in my dreams.

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Close to Timberlake. I know my mom is thinking of Swede too. He died only a few months ago. She's lost her husband, her father in less than one year. I want to go to Swede's grave but I don't want to ask. She turns around and says do you want to go Swede's grave. I nod yes.

The earth is still fresh. His grave has a small steel marker, listing his name, his date of birth, his date of death. Immediately next to his grave sits a large headstone. I stand and remember Swede. My mom is quiet. It feels like spring here. I half expect to hear meadowlarks and the sun to shine, soothing away the pain. Swede, my stepfather for 26 of my 29 years. I finally look at the headstone and it has my mother's name. Henrietta M. Lind, born July 31, 1938.

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